

The Boy





Elsie, Roald and Alfheid

Chapter 1

Homesick



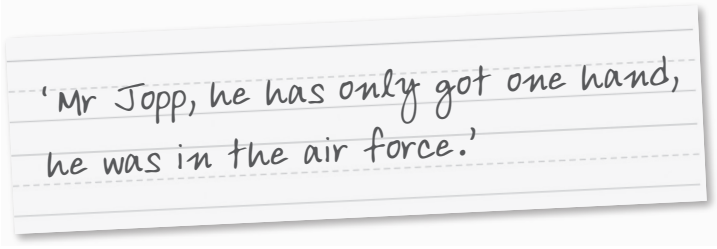
To understand how Roald Dahl became such a fantastic writer, I think it's important to find out what he was like as a boy. Let's picture him, aged about nine years old when he first went to boarding school.

It was called St Peter's, and it was a long way from home, near the seaside town of Weston-super-Mare in Somerset, England. There were about seventy boys there, aged between eight and thirteen. No girls. St Peter's didn't really look like a school. It was more like the kind of spooky house you find in ghost stories, with dark, pointed windows and ivy creeping all over the outside walls.

The boys were grouped into 'houses', which meant that they lived together in different parts of the school. Each house had a name: Duckworth Butterflies, Duckworth Grasshoppers, Crawford Butterflies and Crawford Grasshoppers. And Roald was a Duckworth Butterfly. The four houses were like teams. They

competed against each other in sports, schoolwork and almost everything. So, really, Roald belonged not just to a school but to a house within that school.

Most of Roald's teachers had fought in the First World War, which would have been a terrible, terrifying, scary time for them. They would nearly all have seen and heard awful, frightening things; they would all have been saddened by knowing someone who had been killed. Some of them would have been badly injured. In one of his letters home, Roald told his mother about a new teacher:



'Mr Jopp, he has only got one hand,
he was in the air force.'

Some of these teachers were fierce. Some of them did odd, crazy things, like chasing the boys around on school trolleys! Many of them were keen on teaching the boys to love the finest things in life, such as great art, great stories, so that they would go on to do great things when they grew up. They did this by giving them inspiring lectures, showing them inspiring films and reading them inspiring stories.

The boys slept in dormitories, which were like old, cold classrooms with iron beds in them. Roald was not allowed to go to the toilet at night, so under

his bed he had a kind of potty called a bedpan. There was no bathroom. He and the other boys washed in front of everyone else in the dormitory, using basins of cold water. Brrrr! If Roald woke up in the night, he could hear all the other boys breathing. Sometimes he could hear boys crying. Sometimes this was a place where he planned great tricks, like climbing out of the windows or hiding sweets and cakes. But sometimes this was a place where boys ganged up on other boys.

Nearly everybody Roald Dahl knew at school was male, apart from one or two teachers, his housemaster's wife and Matron, who was a sort of replacement mother while the boys were away from home. Some schoolboys really liked their matron. Others didn't. Not at all. Roald was one of those. In his first autobiography *Boy*, he says:

Looking back on it now, there seems little doubt that the Matron disliked small boys very much indeed. She never smiled at us or said anything nice, and when for example the lint stuck to the cut on your kneecap, you were not allowed to take it off yourself bit by bit so that it didn't hurt. She would always whip it off with a flourish, muttering, 'Don't be such a ridiculous little baby!'

When he first went to boarding school, Roald was very homesick. He slept in his bed the wrong way

round, with his head near the window, so that he could look out across the Bristol Channel towards Llandaff, his home town in Wales, on the other side of the water. Once he was so homesick that he pretended to be seriously ill with appendicitis, which wasn't just an illness that would get him out of school for a couple of weeks, but an illness that meant a surgeon would slice him open and whip out his appendix. He wanted to go home *that* badly. In *Boy*, Roald says that the school sent him home, but the family doctor soon figured out that Roald was just pretending and so he and the doctor struck a deal: the doctor wouldn't say anything about Roald fibbing and would confirm that he had a real stomach infection – but only if Roald went back to the school.

I should say here that anyone writing about Roald Dahl's life has to be very, very careful about one thing. Roald sometimes told stories that were *not* completely and utterly true. As he once wrote, 'I don't lie. I merely make the truth a little more interesting . . . I don't break my word – I merely bend it slightly.'

So, did Roald *really* strike a deal with the doctor? Did he *really* fool Matron and his teachers that he had appendicitis? We'll never know for certain. My guess is that *something* like that happened, but as he told the story he added bits to it. And I think this because – *shhh* – I do the same thing when I write!

But what we *do* know is that Roald Dahl was

definitely homesick. In *Boy*, he says that for the whole of the first term he was homesick. He talks of the people looking after him – the headmaster, teachers and Matron – as if they were a mix of tyrants, dictators, swindlers and cranks.



Harald Dahl, 1863–1920

However you might be surprised about the sort of home he was homesick for, because his family was quite EXTRAORDINARY.

Although Roald had an English accent, his parents came from Norway. Before Roald was born, his father, Harald Dahl, decided to leave Norway and seek his fortune. He set up a new business in the thriving coal industry of South Wales. His mother, before she married Harald, was called Sofie Magdalene Hesselberg. Roald wasn't their first baby. Before him there were Astri and Alfchild. And, before that, Harald had had



Astri Dahl, 1912–20

two children with his first wife. They were called Ellen and Louis. Harald's first wife, whom he had loved very much, had died. So, Roald was number five and number six was Else. But then two terrible things happened. First, Astri died and then, soon after, Roald's father died too. Roald's mother was expecting a baby when her husband died. This was another daughter – Asta. And all this happened by the time Roald was still only three years old.

That's an awful lot of information to absorb in one go, but I think it's important to know about a person's background if you are to understand them. It's events like these that go to shape who a person is, and how he or she thinks. (If you'd like to see Roald Dahl's family tree, it's on page 20.)

Roald would have remembered very little of the tragedies, because he was so young when they happened. He must have grown up relying on his mother for stories about his father and his older sister. He would have heard stories *about* these people instead of having them as *real* people to know and to touch. And he would have had to imagine what they were like from the stories he had heard about them. This must have been a lot of work for his imagination. If we're looking for the different ingredients that made Roald Dahl into a storyteller, I think learning to imagine and learning to listen to stories are two of the most important.

And there's something else. These family stories weren't told to Roald in the language he used at school. They were told in Norwegian. Back then, he was bilingual – he could think and talk in two different languages – and there was hardly anyone he met in Britain who could speak his home language of Norwegian. He grew up knowing a sort of secret language, and it was in that secret language he would have learned about his father.

For those of us who speak just one language, how we speak and how we write are kind of invisible. We just do it. We don't have to think too much about which words to use, or why we use one word or another. And we don't have to think too much about how we say things. But people who are bilingual hop between their two languages and doing that hopping often stirs up questions about the words we use and why and how we use them.

Roald's mother was a very important person in his life. She was right at the heart of the Dahl family. She was the one who kept things and people together. And she told stories. But she was also



Roald Dahl's mother



Roald, aged 6

the person who sent Roald away to school. So she was responsible for making him happy *and* making him feel homesick and sad.

Much later in his life, Roald often told interviewers that he thought children were quite able to love and hate their parents at the same time and that was why in his stories he wrote about parents or other grown-ups who are beastly, alongside others who are lovely. There are Matilda's parents and Miss Honey in *Matilda*. Or how about the witches and Grandmamma in *The Witches*? Roald Dahl was one of the first writers who created this mixture of good and bad parents in his children's books. You can find it in fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* but before Roald Dahl it was quite rare to find these beastly and lovely characters side by side in stories.

So that's what Roald Dahl's life was like when he was nine years old. I think it's quite unusual. You may recognize some bits of it. I hope you don't recognize others. But the good bits and the sad bits and the downright bizarre bits form the background of one of my favourite writers. And I think, together, they start to give an idea of why he went on to write such amazing books.



I'm going to end this chapter with a little story of my own.

When I think of Roald Dahl's childhood, I'm reminded of someone I knew very, very well: my own father. When my father was a little boy, about the same age as Roald, his parents split up and he never saw his dad again. So he also lost his dad. Like Roald, he was brought up in a household mostly full of women – his mother, his sister and his aunts. And, some of the time, there was a different language spoken at home. His mother told him they were different and that other people didn't believe the same things. This was sometimes a strange and uncomfortable feeling.

My dad said that all through his childhood, whenever he felt sad or angry or uncomfortable or different, he would dream that his father would

suddenly turn up and make things better. He would stare at the photos of his father and listen to his mother's stories about him, about how good and clever he was. But it was always just the photos. No dad turned up. So my dad said that he had a secret inner life where he and his imaginary father lived.

My dad wasn't sent away to a boarding school, but his mother used to have to go into hospital for several weeks at a time, and, while she was away, he used to have nightmares in which she would die and he would have to live with the relatives he didn't like and who, he thought, didn't like him. And people around him told stories, some of them about ghosts and spirits called 'dybbuks' and a giant clay man called 'the Golem' who smashes up a whole city. Meanwhile, there was another place, another country, where his grandfather and some of his other relations came from, where it was said there were dangerous men on horses called 'Cossacks' . . .

And there the similarity ends, because my dad didn't grow up to be a famous writer like Roald Dahl. But he did become a storyteller and he did write about his own life. He also did a lot of other kinds of writing: he turned this inner life into thoughts about how best to teach and talk to children so that they would enjoy listening, reading and acting out stories. He kept thinking about the child he once was, imagining that quite a few of the children he was teaching were

a bit like him, and wondering what kinds of stories and poems he and they might like. He wrote about languages other than English and he looked closely at how children speak and write.

So, when I think about Roald Dahl's childhood, I can't help but think how there were some things about both Roald and my father and their lives that were quite similar, and how perhaps that led them both to do things in life that were quite similar too.

I think that a childhood can sometimes last a lifetime.

